

Sir Thomas More



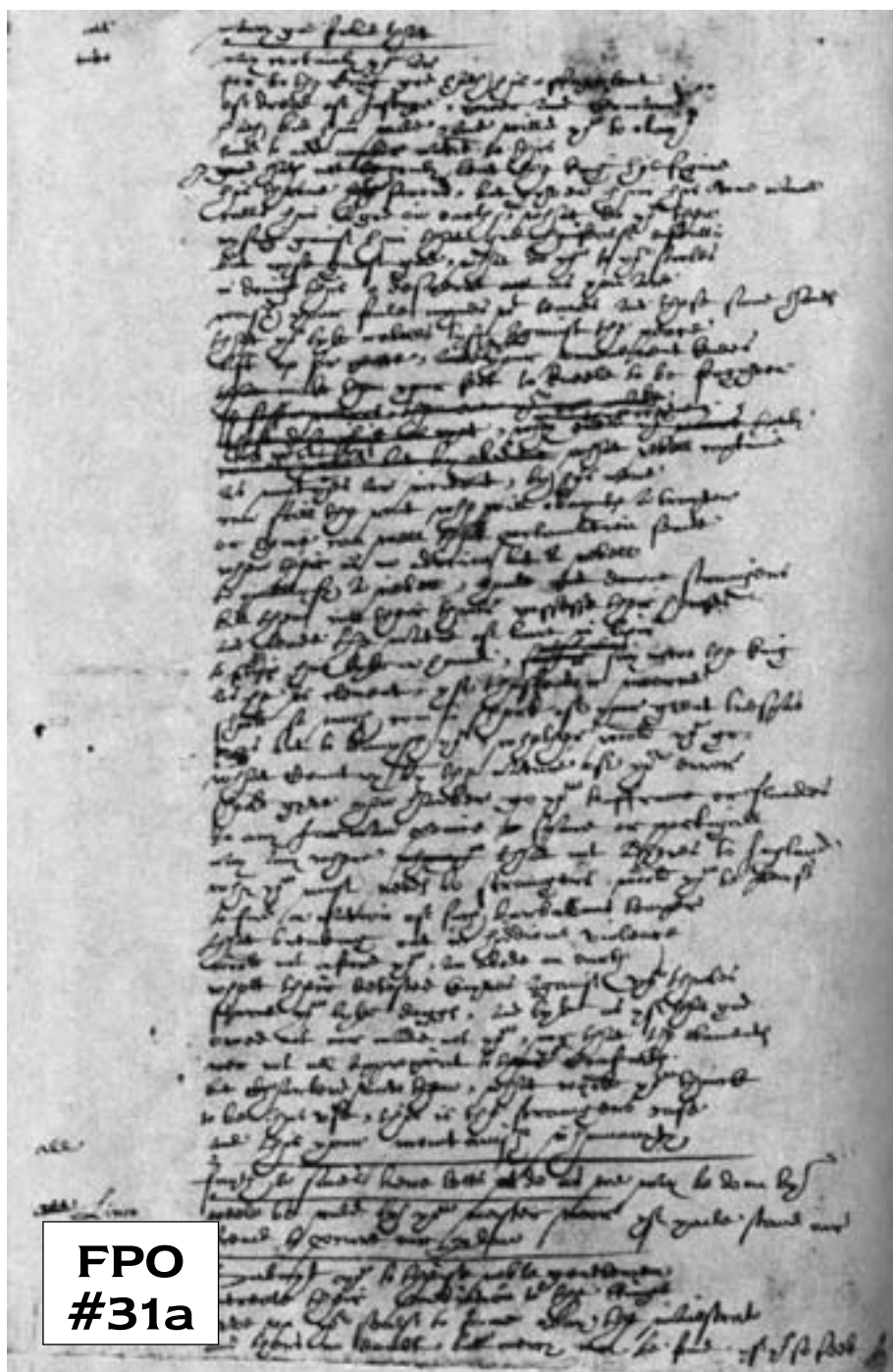
INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare composed only a very small part of the play *Sir Thomas More*. The rest was probably written by his fellow dramatists Anthony Munday, Henry Chettle, Thomas Heywood, and Thomas Dekker. The collaborative writing of plays was not unusual, but this is one of only two known plays (the other is the play *Edward III*) where Shakespeare contributed little more than one scene to others' work. The date of composition of the play is uncertain; it was probably sometime between 1593 and 1603. It might not all have been written at one time but rather in two stints separated by several years.

The play is remarkable for one reason: Scholars believe that in the existing manuscript, Shakespeare's portion of the play is written in his own hand. The manuscript, classified as Harley 7368, is held in the British Library in London and comprises 22 leaves of paper—44 pages, not all written on and in different sizes. It became the subject of great excitement in the early 20th century when it was revealed to be, at least in part, one of Shakespeare's play manuscripts. Until then, it had been thought that all Shakespeare's play manuscripts were lost, presumed destroyed, leaving us only his signatures on certain nondramatic documents (including his will) to show what his handwriting looked like. Comparison of those signatures with the writing on three pages of Harley 7368 convinced experts that their handwriting, formerly known only as Hand D, was Shakespeare's (see Pollard et al., 1923). The rest of the manuscript (apart

from these three pages) is in a variety of other hands. Other evidence corroborated the handwriting: Hand D uses uncommon spellings (including *straing* for modern *strange* and *scilens* for modern *silence*) that appear in early printed plays by Shakespeare, and the scene written in Hand D is stylistically similar to ones by Shakespeare.

The play tells of the rise of the historical figure More (1478–1535) from being one of the two undersheriffs of London to becoming a knight and a privy counsellor and finally gaining the Lord Chancellorship, one of the highest government offices in England, which brought him close to King Henry VIII. The second half of the play charts More's fall from power, arising from his refusal to sign a document accepting Henry VIII's assertion of himself as the head of the newly formed Church of England. The play does not name or depict the king and does not make specific the circumstances of More's moral dilemma—it comes down to whether to obey his king or his religious conscience—so presumably these details were thought to be well known to playgoers. More's book *Utopia*, written in Latin and first published in 1516, had been published in three English-language editions by the time the play was written, and his fame appears to have been widespread. In particular, More's role in the calming of a riot against foreigners in London (the so-called Ill May Day uprising of 1517), dramatized in Shakespeare's contribution to the play, seemed especially relevant to people in the 1590s as xenophobic tensions rose in the capital.



Facsimile of a page added to the manuscript of Sir Thomas More. The handwriting here is believed to be Shakespeare's.

The topic was clearly a sensitive one, since the manuscript contains extensive annotations by the state censor, the master of the revels, who checked every play script before it was performed. The master at this time was Edmund Tilney. Having made small changes to the ethnic identification of the foreigners (Lombards, Frenchmen, or generically “strangers”), he decided against any depiction of the riot. The Lombards came from what we now call Italy, so using this label projects the aliens’ origin far into mainland Europe, while the rioters themselves refer to their enemies being French and Dutch, people from places on the western seaboard of Europe and hence much closer to England. The resulting manuscript contains multiple alterations and rewrites of scenes, making it an especially difficult task for editors to present the play to modern readers.

The account of the play given here is dependent on John Jowett’s forthcoming Arden 3 edition, which he generously let the author see in advance of publication, although quotations are from Jowett’s text of the play in the Oxford Complete Works of 2005. Jowett divides the play into scenes, numbered 1 to 17, but not into acts (as below). As this play contains relatively few lines actually by Shakespeare, it is here discussed in a somewhat abbreviated entry.

BACKGROUND

A play telling the life story of Thomas More was bound to be controversial in the 1590s. More was the most famous English public figure to suffer from the cataclysmic political and religious events known as the English Reformation, when a new Protestant Church of England was created and broke from the authority of the pope and the Roman Church to make the monarch (Henry VIII himself, and each successor) the supreme religious ruler. Before Henry fell out with Rome, More had long served him by hunting and executing heretical Protestants, which religious zeal was markedly at odds with the religious tolerance that More appeared to advocate in his fictional prose narrative *Utopia* published in 1516. The Utopians allow freedom of conscience to all faiths, condemning only outright atheism as a crime.

The historical More found himself unable to follow Henry’s volte-face in 1534 and chose instead to be executed for the treason of denying the king’s religious supremacy, for which martyrdom he was made a saint by the Catholic Church in 1935. Henry VIII’s daughter Mary I returned England to Catholicism from 1553 to 1558, after which her half-sister Elizabeth I returned it to Protestantism, the official religion of the country to this day. The experience of three changes of official religion—each of which criminalized the religious beliefs of a sizable proportion of the population—was still raw in the 1590s. Curiously, however, the state censor seems not to have objected on principle to this Catholic martyr’s life being dramatized but was gravely concerned about the representation of rioting in London. In the 1590s, there was considerable antipathy toward European exiles in London, in particular Protestants known as Huguenots fleeing persecution in Catholic France and Spanish-controlled Holland, and there were notable riots (partly xenophobic, partly economic) by apprentices (Pollard et al., 1923, 33–40). Inevitably, a dramatization of the Ill May Day riots of 1517 (which were essentially about economics, not religion) would in the 1590s take on fresh topical associations of religious strife, especially when tied to the story of More’s martyrdom for refusing to abandon the Roman faith and take up Protestantism.

The main sources of the play are the 1587 edition of Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, which is used particularly heavily for the first half of the play, and Nicholas Harpsfield’s *Life of Thomas More*, which provided much of the second half. Harpsfield’s biography was derived in part from material provided by More’s son-in-law William Roper, who is present as a character in the play, and it circulated privately among secret Catholics in manuscript form in the second half of the 16th century. Anthony Munday, the main author of the play, could have had access to Harpsfield’s biography via his employer, Richard Topcliffe, who certainly had a copy that he found while working for Elizabeth I’s regime hunting down, torturing, and executing secret Catholics and extreme Protestants (Munday 1990, 6–11). One of the extraordinary facts of the

play is Munday's involvement in it, since he had published in the early 1580s a series of vehemently anti-Catholic tracts, having previously stayed for a while in the English College in Rome. Munday may have stayed at this seminary for training Catholic priests because he was genuinely attracted to Catholicism, or else he may have been under cover so he could later detect the priests that Rome was sending to London.

SYNOPSIS

Foreigners from Europe residing in London early in 1517 are abusing the local population, abducting citizens' wives, and stealing their goods. Londoner John Lincoln makes out a bill of complaint to be read in public as an incitement to riot against the foreigners. Lincoln attracts a group of followers including Doll Williamson, who was nearly raped by one of the foreigners, and her husband. Thomas More is serving as one of the two sheriffs of London and gaining a reputation for decency and honesty, leavened with a mischievous sense of wit. At the sentencing of a pickpocket, More intervenes when one of the justices attempts to lay part of the blame on the victim of the crime for tempting the criminal by carrying around too much money and being too easy to rob. More adjourns the proceedings and persuades the pickpocket to pick the justice's own well-filled purse, thus exposing his hypocrisy. The jest successfully carried off earns the pickpocket a pardon. Meanwhile, the king's counsellors debate the growing unrest of the London population, which the king is unaware of even though it is in part due to his indulgence of the foreigners, which is encouraged by their ambassador. News arrives that the lord mayor is besieged by rioters, and as the privy counsellors leave to deal with this crisis, they agree to seek Sheriff More's help because he is popular with, and respected by, the citizens of London.

The rioters, some of them in armor, seek out the foreigners' houses and discuss how to deal with the forces they know are being mustered against them. The foreigners' houses are discovered to be empty—they earlier fled in fear—so the riot-

ers decide to set fire to them and make good their escape while the Lord Mayor is having his men put out the fires. More discovers that some of the rioters have broken open the prisons and swelled their insurrection with the criminals they have released, and he proposes a parley with the riot's ringleaders. Approaching the rioters, More rescues a sergeant-at-arms whom they are attacking, and he calls them to listen to him. For all their antipathy to the foreigners and the authorities that have let them down, the rioters respect Sheriff More and listen intently to a speech in which he persuasively argues that their rebellion is an offense against their king and hence against God who put the king in power over them. Moreover, if for their rebellion the rioters were banished from the kingdom, More points out, they would be foreigners in another country and would want to be tolerated by the natives. Promising them the king's mercy if they abandon their insurrection, More persuades the rioters to lay down their weapons, and the ringleaders agree to go to prison while he presents their case to the king. For this brave and peaceful suppression of rebellion, the king makes More a knight and one of his counsellors.

Despite More's promise, the ringleaders of the riot are sentenced to death, and the first of them, John Lincoln, is executed. Doll Williamson asks to be executed next (before her husband) and is on the ladder, reproving More for breaking his promise to them, when the king's pardon arrives. For his eloquent pleading on the rioters' behalf, More is made Lord Chancellor of England. More reflects on the moral dangers that come with such high office, but his gloom is lightened by further jests. When the Dutch humanist scholar Erasmus pays a visit to his house, More has his servant Randall dress as the master of the house while he, More, takes on Randall's role as servant to see if the wise man can spot the deception. Randall tries in vain to speak intelligently in English (having neatly avoided Erasmus's attempt to engage him in Latin) and is exposed. When More is presented with a long-haired ruffian who has been arrested for a public brawl, he finds that the man has taken a vow against haircuts. More's response is to

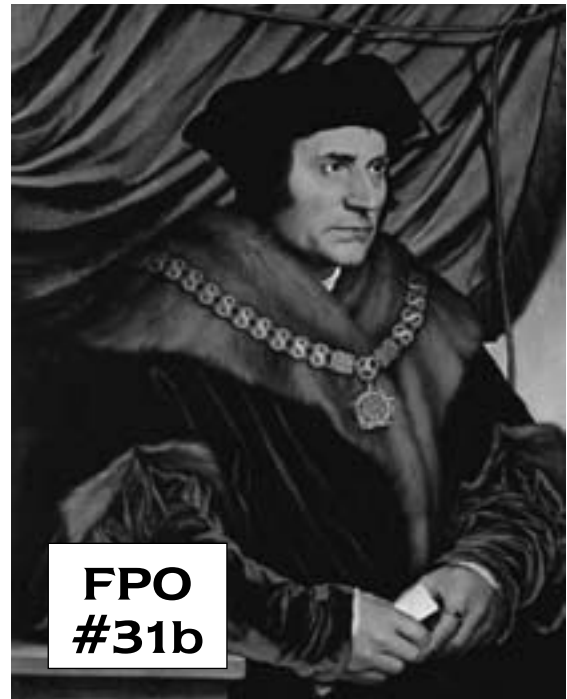
offer to let the man keep his hair while languishing in jail, or to accept a haircut and a short sentence. The man first chooses to keep his hair but after a brief spell in jail decides to break his vow and is pardoned by More. At his home in Chelsea, More is visited by the Lord Mayor and aldermen of London and prepares an elaborate feast for them. A troupe of traveling players arrives and offers a performance; from their list of titles More picks *The Marriage of Wit and Wisdom*. More has the performance begin immediately even though one actor is away trying to procure a beard for the show. More offers to take this actor's part, that of Good Counsel (a role More plays in real life), and he extemporizes it. The evening is interrupted by More's being called to a meeting of the privy council.

In the council, matters of state policy are being debated when Palmer enters with papers (the Act of Supremacy) that the king has asked his counsellors to sign. One of the counsellors, Rochester, refuses and is arrested. More asks for time to consider the matter and is instructed to return to his house in Chelsea and remain there. The other counsellors immediately sign the papers. At his home, More's family seems to have presentiment of his fate in the form of dreams of his downfall and death. More arrives and behaves as if a great burden has been lifted from him. Although he is sure his family can survive without him—even his girls are educated and can make their way in the world—he is fearful of what will happen to his servants. Word arrives that More must sign the papers instantly or be conveyed to the Tower, and More chooses the latter. On his way there, crowds gather to see him pass. More's servants discover that he has left each of them 20 nobles, which is around two-and-a-half pounds, a great sum. In the Tower, More hears that he is to be executed the following morning, and despite the pleading of his wife and son-in-law Roper, he refuses to subscribe to the king's papers in order to avoid this fate. The next morning, More is taken to the place of beheading, and after a series of jokes about what is to happen and a speech that does not quite make the traditional admission of guilt, he is executed.

CHARACTERS

Thomas More

First seen as a sheriff of London, later knighted and made Lord Chancellor of England, More earns a reputation for sound judgment, first as a judge and advocate in lawsuits and later as an adviser to King Henry VIII. As much loved by the common citizens of London as the nobility, More combines humility and common sense with a love of jests, in particular puns and practical jokes. Hypocrisy he particularly detests, which is ironic, since he finds himself in a dispute with his monarch (about papal supremacy) that forces him to be hypocritical: either he must refuse to obey the king (which he had told the rioters was a sin of rebellion against God) or he must betray his lifelong religious conviction that the pope, not the king, is the highest spiritual leader. The reputation of More as a wise counsellor was established before composition of



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Portrait of Sir Thomas More from 1527. (Painting by Hans Holbein the Younger)

the play began. It is present in the sources and is taken for granted in censor Tilney's instruction that the dramatists begin with "his good service done being Sheriff of London." At one level, the play presents More as a transparently virtuous man. When the player of the part of Good Counsel in the inset play in Scene 9 is unavailable, More steps in and extemporizes his part: This establishes that More personally embodies the principles of good counsel. The jesting that More displays throughout the play becomes somewhat tense in the last few scenes, and in performance it can be painfully awkward. On two occasions, in Scenes 13 and 16, More seems to tell his family that he will submit to the king's demands, and they express relief and excitement that he will be released, only for him to explain that they have misunderstood him and that he will stand firm and accept his execution. These moments of misunderstanding are related to More's fondness for verbal ambiguities: "I'll now satisfy the King's good pleasure" (13.171) means not that he will subscribe but that he will agree to go to the Tower, and "I have deceived myself, I must acknowledge" (16.91) turns out to be only a generalized admission of human weakness, not a specific admission of an error to be rectified. These moments of misunderstanding may be played comically, but the humor is grim in the cruelty it inflicts upon More's loved ones.

John Lincoln

A citizen of London (by occupation a broker, meaning a trader in commodities) who instigates the anti-foreigner riot of May 1517 by having a bill of complaint against them read aloud in the London streets. He leads the riot and is later executed for it, despite an assurance from More that the king will be merciful. Lincoln finds himself losing control of the rioters and becoming frustrated with them. He is paired with Doll Williamson in their last appearance (addressing the London crowds just before he is executed) and there is textual warrant for performers to suggest that Doll is more attracted to brave Lincoln than to her timid husband.

Doll Williamson

The strong-willed and feisty wife of a carpenter of London. The play's opening stage direction calls her "a lusty woman," which refers not to her sexual appetite but to her force of personality. Doll is the visible victim of the foreigners' crimes as she is dragged across the stage by Francis de Barde who means to rape her. She narrowly escapes execution for her part in the riot against the foreigners. Doll explicitly denies that she is physically attractive—"I have no beauty to like [please] a husband" (1.5–6)—but in performance she may be impressively assertive, putting to shame the husbands who, as she repeatedly points out, allow themselves to be abused and humiliated more thoroughly and publicly than any woman of London would tolerate. That is to say, from Doll's point of view, the men of London are being emasculated by the foreigners. When she appears with the rioters, she is in a shirt of chainmail and pieces of armor while holding a sword and shield, thus visibly usurping male power (rather like Joan of Arc of *Henry VI, Part I*, Shakespeare's hit play of 1592). She also usurps official nomenclature in dubbing the ringleader "Captain Lincoln," as if they were an alternative army; More picks up this nomenclature and uses it ironically to ask how hierarchy can coexist with the anarchy of a riot. In the scene of the execution of the ringleaders, Doll might be played as more attracted to Lincoln than to her own husband (and he to her), although she kisses her husband and says that so long as any Englishman is available, she will never kiss a foreigner.

Williamson

Doll's husband, a carpenter of London who stands to lose not only his wife to the foreigners but also a pair of doves that are stolen from him. Williamson is not as belligerent as his wife but joins the rioting and is sentenced to death for it. He is noticeably less active than his wife in the rebellion. Like all the rioters, Williamson's role in the play ends with the execution in Scene 7.

Sherwin

A goldsmith of London. Before the start of the play, his wife was taken from him by the foreigner de Barde, who made Sherwin pay for her maintenance while keeping her; this scandal is widely known among Londoners of all classes. In the opening scene, Doll Williamson says that Sherwin's wife was "enticed" (1.10) from him, and Palmer uses the same word when recounting the story (3.19), which makes Sherwin seem rather more inadequate than Williamson, whose wife, Doll, forcefully resists de Barde.

George Betts

A broker (merchant) of London and, after Lincoln, the leading rioter, having been the first to advocate standing up to the foreigners. His catchphrase is a leader's "let us": "let's beat them down . . . Let us step in . . . let us along then" (1.30–31, 39, 148), "Let some of us enter the strangers' houses . . . Let's stand upon our swords" (4.47, 64), and "Let's mark him" (6.100).

Ralph Betts

George's brother (also a broker of London), a willing rioter, although seemingly more because he appreciates the opportunity for chaos and the sexual license it may bring than out of a strong sense of grievance.

Francis de Barde

One of the two foreigners seen in the play and much the worse behaved: The play begins with him dragging Doll Williamson across the stage in an attempt to abduct and rape her.

Cavaler

An associate of de Barde who steals Williamson's doves.

Lord Mayor of London

As the head of the London Corporation, the holder of the highest public office in the City. The rioters keep him confined in his house to prevent

him marshalling his forces against them. Later, he and his wife are lavishly entertained by More.

Earl of Surrey

A poet and a counsellor, Surrey signs the Act of Supremacy "instantly" (10.98) upon seeing what happens to Rochester and More for refusing.

Earl of Shrewsbury

Seen almost always in the company of Surrey, and like him, Shrewsbury is almost indecently quick to sign the Act of Supremacy. Together with Surrey, Shrewsbury executes the warrant to arrest More and take him to the Tower.

John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester

The most implacable opponent of the king's Act of Supremacy, Rochester immediately refuses to sign the papers and patiently accepts his arrest, imprisonment, and execution with Christian fortitude. He undergoes the same fate as More but two days earlier. Scene 12, his entry to prison, shows him doing all the things that More will later do at greater length: comforting his friends, waxing philosophical about its being better to be locked up with one's private thoughts than out in the tempting world and saying how much he still loves his king.

Sir Thomas Palmer

A nobleman who was given the job of quelling the unrest in the city after the Sherwin scandal and who helps dampen of the embers of the riot after More has talked down the ringleaders. He later brings the king's paper containing the Act of Supremacy to the counsel.

Sir Roger Cholmley

Seen only in the company of Palmer, Cholmley blames the senior noblemen for allowing the foreigners' abuses and not informing the king.

Sir John Munday

A nobleman hurt while trying to disperse a gang of rioting apprentices.

Randall

More's servant who switches places with his master to play a trick on Erasmus.

William Roper

More's son-in-law, and somewhat like him in learning and fortitude.

Lady More

More's wife, who repeatedly tries to convince him to give up his principles and save himself by signing the Act of Supremacy.

More's Daughters

One of whom, Margaret, is married to William Roper.

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam

A Catholic theologian and the leading humanist of Europe.

Justice Suresby

A hypocritical judge who blames Smart, the victim of pickpocketing, for his misfortune. More plays a practical joke on him to show that Suresby is as guilty as Smart of tempting pickpockets.

Lifter

A pickpocket who helps More play a joke on Suresby.

Smart

One of Lifter's victims.

Nicholas Downes

A sergeant-at-arms whom More rescues in the riot of May 1517 and who later arrests More for refusing to sign the Act of Supremacy.

Jack Falconer

A long-haired ruffian who reluctantly accepts a haircut instead of a jail sentence.

The Players, including Luggins

This is a small touring theatrical troupe (just four actors) of the kind common in the first half of the

16th century. This company is described as the Cardinal's Men, which might make early audiences think of the most famous cardinal of Henry VIII's reign, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, who was More's predecessor as Lord Chancellor of England. In the middle of the 16th century, the state became increasingly involved in the regulation of acting, requiring that each troupe had an aristocratic patron. This forced out the smaller, less formally organized touring troupes and favored the formation of larger companies of between six and 12 permanent members plus additional hired men. These larger companies settled in the new purpose-built theaters that arose in London from 1567.

DIFFICULTIES OF THE PLAY

The chief difficulties of the play arise in relation to the contextual knowledge needed to make sense of the action. The play assumes that the reader or playgoer already knows the story of Thomas More's life and in particular the reason for his downfall and (since it was written for a London audience) understands the sometimes uneasy relationship between the monarchical power centered on Westminster and the City authority centered on the Guildhall. The name of the king is never spoken in the play—confusingly he is also a few times referred to as a prince—and just what is in the papers that he wants his privy counsellors to subscribe to is never mentioned. These difficulties can be overcome by reading the editor's introduction in a good critical edition. The language of the play is, by the standards of early-modern drama, relatively straightforward, and there is little complex poetry.

The motivations of the characters are straightforward, with perhaps the exception of the foreigners whose reason for being in London is never given and whose deeds are stereotypically evil. It is clear that the reader/playgoer is supposed to side with the abused Londoners, at least initially, but once in full flow, the rioting can appear to become simply driven by ugly xenophobia. This might be understood as a development necessary in order that More's suppression of the riot seems just, but there are considerable problems with the arguments

about obedience that More offers. More's mix of moral flexibility in certain areas—such as his indulgence of a serial pickpocket in order to make fun of Justice Suresby—sits awkwardly with his rigid inflexibility in others, and it is difficult to know what we are supposed to make of this inconsistency. It may only be a consequence of the play's several dramatists failing to agree on just how to portray More (that is, it may be an accident), or else it may be interpreted as a fatal flaw in More's character.

KEY PASSAGES

Act I, Scene 2 (Scene 2)

MORE. Sirrah, you know that you are known
to me,
And I have often saved ye from this place
Since first I came in office. Thou seest beside
That Justice Suresby is thy heavy friend,
For all the blame that he pretends to Smart
For tempting thee with such a sum of money.
I tell thee what: devise me but a means
To pick or cut his purse, and on my credit,
And as I am a Christian and a man,
I will procure thy pardon for that jest.

LIFTER. Good Master Sheriff seek not my
overthrow.
You know, sir, I have many heavy friends,
And more indictments like to come upon me.
You are too deep for me to deal withal.
You are known to be one of the wisest men
That is in England. I pray ye, Master Sheriff,
Go not about to undermine my life.

MORE. Lifter, I am true subject to my king.
Thou much mistak'st me, and for thou shalt
not think
I mean by this to hurt thy life at all,
I will maintain the act when thou hast done it.
Thou knowst there are such matters in my
hands
As, if I pleased to give them to the jury,
I should not need this way to circumvent thee.
All that I aim at is a merry jest.
Perform it, Lifter, and expect my best.

(Scene numbers identified within parentheses are per Jowett.) This is the scene that the censor Edmund Tilney (whose instructions appear at the very beginning of the manuscript) wanted the play to begin with, rather than beginning with the crimes of the foreigners and the emerging resistance of the Londoners. Aside from other considerations, this preference suggests Tilney's imperfect grasp of how biographical dramas generally work: It is usual not to begin by showing the eponymous hero(es)—think of *Hamlet* or *Antony and Cleopatra*—but to come to them after developing the dramatic situation and the world in which they live. Here we see More for the first time, and he is setting up a practical joke. The pickpocket Lifter has been convicted and is about to be sentenced (death would be the usual punishment in such a case) when More intervenes and asks to be left alone with the prisoner. One of the justices, the appropriately named Suresby, had spoken in mitigation of the offense, describing the 10 pounds that the victim (Smart) was carrying in his purse as typical of the “fond baits that foolish people lay / To tempt the needy” (2.32). That is to say, the victim is partly guilty of the crime because he was at least negligent in carrying such a lot of money around and perhaps even tempted the pickpocket by bragging of his large purse, for which prize even an innocent man may be “provoked to that he never meant” (2.30). In modern legal language, this is known as entrapment and can form a defense.

More is not convinced by Suresby's line of reasoning and sets out to expose its falsity by having Lifter steal Suresby's purse in the courtroom. Here, for the first time, we see what will become a recurrent theme of the play, which is More's advocacy of the Christian golden rule of “whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them” (Matthew 7:12). By reflecting Suresby's argument back upon Suresby, More hopes to expose his hypocrisy, for at the very least, Suresby will presumably not consider himself complicit in the theft of his own purse. As it turns out, the purse Lifter takes from Suresby contains seven pounds, so Suresby is also a hypocrite for having condemned Smart for

carrying around a lot of money. This scene is easily overlooked as a simple piece of comedy that merely shows More's love of practical jokes, but it has a serious side too in More's exposure of Suresby's hypocrisy. Notice, too, Lifter's fear of what More intends, thinking perhaps that his purpose is to make matters worse for the criminal: "seek not my overthrow . . . Go not about to undermine my life" (2.61–67). To reassure Lifter, More has to promise that he will "maintain the act when thou hast done it" (2.71), which rather exposes More himself to a charge of hypocrisy: If stealing is an absolute wrong, then More is no better than Lifter. That More does not see this suggests that he is applying a relativistic notion of right and wrong in which the purpose of an act, not the act itself, determines how it is to be judged. If we really are to think that this is More's approach, it will become retrospectively ironic later in the play when we encounter a More who finds himself unable to follow others' pragmatic and context-sensitive approach to a request from the king.

Act II, Scene 4 (Scene 6)

MORE. Grant them removed, and grant that
this your noise
Hath chid down all the majesty of England.
Imagine that you see the wretched strangers,
Their babies at their backs, with their poor
luggage,
Plodding to th'ports and coasts for
transportation,
And that you sit as kings in your desires,
Authority quite silenced by your brawl,
And you in ruff of your opinions clothed:
What had you got? I'll tell you: you had taught
How insolence and strong hand should prevail,
How order should be quelled. And by this
pattern
Not one of you should live an agèd man;
For other ruffians, as their fancies wrought
With selfsame hand, self reasons, and self right,
Would shark on you, and men, like ravenous
fishes,
Would feed on one another.

DOLL. Before God, that's as true as the
gospel.

LINCOLN. Nay, this's a sound fellow, I tell you.
Let's mark him.

MORE. Let me set up before your thoughts,
good friends,
One supposition, which if you will mark
You shall perceive how horrible a shape
Your innovation bears. First, 'tis a sin
Which oft th'apostle did forewarn us of,
Urging obedience to authority;
And 'twere no error if I told you all
You were in arms 'gainst God.

This speech is the climax of Shakespeare's contribution to the play. Confronting an angry mob of rioting Londoners, More speaks calmly to them, first about their intended victims and then about the nature of their rebellion. Although the audience has seen only rapacious male foreigners (de Barde wanting to force himself upon Doll Williamson, Cavalier stealing Williamson's doves), More powerfully conjures up images of refugee families with children, forced from their homes to be repatriated. His next maneuver is even more subtle, as More applies the Christian golden rule ("Do unto others . . .") to the case of the rebels. Having established the wretchedness of the foreigners, More elevates the rebels, imagining them "kings" in their "desires," as "ruffians" absurdly decked out in the fancy starched-linen collars called ruffs. This topsyturvydom achieved, the elevated rebels—having overturned the natural order that keeps them in obedience to their betters—would then be subject to the same overthrow by other rebels. If violence be allowed to disrupt hierarchy, then there can be no end of turmoil, for each new victor in the struggle would be overturned by the next in an endless succession of coups. Shakespeare dramatizes precisely such a sequence of overturnings in both his tetralogies of history plays: Once a group of rebels establishes that a monarch can be unseated, its own preferred holder of the throne finds himself

attacked by yet another group seeking to repeat the process to establish their candidate. A ruff is also a small freshwater fish, and presumably having used the word to mean *collar*, Shakespeare was inspired to his image of “ravenous fishes” that would “feed on one another” (6.96–97).

Although More had not made explicit the religious application of the principle of reciprocity, the rebels pick up the latent suggestion: “that’s as true as the gospel” (6.98). At this point, More brings in the connection between social upheaval and religious disobedience, arguing that since God put the king in a position of authority to act as his deputy on Earth, rebelling against the king entails rebelling against God. The rioters, of course, had not directed their violence toward the king but rather the foreigners, but it amounts to the same thing because they seek to take justice into their own hands rather than submit their grievances to the proper authorities the king has put in place. We learned earlier, in Scene 3, that the king has no knowledge of the Londoners’ grievances or even of the abuses enacted by the foreigners, and the foreigners’ ambassador has interceded to prevent their being held to account; as Cholmley says to the senior counsellors of the king, “Men of your place and greatness are to blame” (3.65) in this. Because the monarch and his appointed officers have the monopoly on redressing wrongdoing in society, the rebels are effectively not only in arms against the foreigners but also against their native social superiors and masters. More tells them that their political rebellion is tantamount to religious rebellion, and this is the argument that wins them over to peaceful submission.

Once again, this argument will in retrospect be ironized by More’s response to the dilemma that his king asks him to subscribe to a religious principle, the Act of [Monarchical] Supremacy, that More is unable to accept. At this stage in the play, More rhetorically and oratorically wields to great effect the idea that monarchical and religious power form an alliance in that the king is God’s deputy. Ironically, Henry’s Act of Supremacy could plausibly be defended as a strengthening of this alliance since the king would then in one person represent

the highest temporal and spiritual authority, while under the present arrangements, the ones More dies defending, the monarch is the highest temporal authority, but the pope in Rome is the highest spiritual authority. This division of authority adds a complexity that More does not present to the rioting Londoners, a rhetorical aporia that playgoers are doubtless meant to consider. Of course, More does not violently rise against his king, as the rioters do, but his is a kind of rebellion nonetheless; the nearest model parallel would be the nonviolent civil disobedience movement (as advocated by Mahandas Gandhi in India and Martin Luther King, Jr., the United States) that encourages passive resistance to wrongdoing. Jesus Christ’s teachings on passive resistance are one of the sources of this tradition.

Act III, Scene 1 (Scene 7)

LINCOLN. [*to Executioner*] Fellow, dispatch.
He goes up.

I was the foremost man in this rebellion,
And I the foremost that must die for it.

DOLL. Bravely, John Lincoln, let thy death
express
That, as thou lived’st a man, thou died’st no less.

LINCOLN. Doll Williamson, thine eyes shall
witness it.

Then to all you that come to view mine end
I must confess I had no ill intent
But against such as wronged us overmuch.
And now I can perceive it was not fit
That private men should carve out their redress
Which way they list. No, learn it now by me:
Obedience is the best in each degree.
And, asking mercy meekly of my king,
I patiently submit me to the law.
But God forgive them that were cause of it;
And, as a Christian, truly from my heart,
I likewise crave they would forgive me too,
. . .

That others by example of the same
Henceforth be warnèd to attempt the like
’Gainst any alien that repairèth hither,

Fare ye well all. The next time that we meet
I trust in heaven we shall each other greet.

He leaps off.

The construction of an onstage gibbet (gallows) for the execution of the ringleaders of the rioting necessarily generates tense anticipation in a playgoing audience that has seen More promise them the benefit of the king's mercy. Indeed, clemency had been a condition insisted upon by Lincoln when he led the rioters to surrender: "We'll be ruled by you, Master More, if you'll stand our friend to procure our pardon" (6.158–59). There is some uncertainty just why the execution proceeds, but the key culpability seems to lie with the Master Sheriff who tells his men "be speedy . . . make haste . . . and see no time be slacked" (7.10–14). Behind all this is the division of authority between the London Corporation (the City) and the monarch in Westminster. As an ordinary matter of civil unrest inside the city walls, the riot comes under the jurisdiction of the London authorities, but the Crown may be appealed to as the ultimate arbiter. More makes just such an appeal to Henry VIII while the City continues with the legal process. This sets up a tense race of the same kind as can be found in cinematic dramatizations of executions in 20th-century America: will word of the governor's stay of execution (in place of the king's pardon) arrive in time to save the condemned man? The division of authority between the monarch and the City also resonates with the division of authority between the king as temporal leader and the pope as spiritual leader. Or, to see it as the dramatists and their intended first audiences would have, the dramatization of the split authority in London—which is the dramatic motor of this scene—offered a way to glance at the fundamental split in authority that is central to the story of More's downfall.

John Lincoln's behavior conforms to the expected convention of a condemned man in making a speech admitting his crime. Typical examples in Shakespeare are Buckingham's "This, this All-Souls' day to my fearful soul / Is the determined

respite of my wrongs" (*Richard III* 5.1.18–19) and the reported end of the traitorous Thane of Cawdor (Macbeth's predecessor):

MALCOLM. . . . very frankly he confessed his
treasons,
Implored your highness' pardon, and set forth
A deep repentance. Nothing in his life
Became him like the leaving it.
(*Macbeth* 1.4.5–8)

Such behavior gave the condemned man a chance to redeem himself somewhat and to impress the spectators (on stage and in the theater audience) with his fortitude. To reject this opportunity was a sign of inveterate malice, as exemplified by the close followers and flatterers of Richard II:

BUSHY. More welcome is the stroke of death
to me
Than Bolingbroke to England.

GREEN. My comfort is that heaven will take
our souls,
And plague injustice with the pains of hell.
(*Richard II* 3.1.31–34)

A modern audience is likely to make its own judgments about the rights and wrongs of Bolingbroke's rebellion against Richard II, but we should take care to note that for the first audiences familiar with this convention Bushy's and Green's refusal to make a good end clearly tips the scales against Richard's party.

A limited amount of exculpation was permissible in such speeches, and John Lincoln takes this as far as possible without actually breaking with the conventional "good death." He refers to the foreigners who "wronged us overmuch" (7.54) but immediately acknowledges that the state has the monopoly on righting such wrongs: "it was not fit / That private men should carve out their redress / Which way they list" (7.55–57). To seek private redress is to undermine "Obedience," which he points out is a principle governing not only the ordinary people

but “each degree” (7.58), that is, every social class. In performance, an actor might choose to make much of this “each degree” and although the Master Sheriff is the highest ranking official present, the lesson is applicable to the recently knighted former sheriff, More, who, this scene later reveals, has been elevated to lord chancellor for his pleading on behalf of the rioters. The principle of the golden rule recurs again in the play when Lincoln asks for reciprocal forgiveness: “God forgive them [the foreigners] that were cause of it; / . . . as . . . / I likewise crave they would forgive me too” (7.61–63).

After offering his death as an example to others—surely the most submissive of conservative acts—Lincoln throws himself off the ladder and is seen to hang. Because the character remains talking until the last moment, there is no opportunity to switch places with a dummy for the purpose of showing the dead body hanging from the gibbet, so we have to assume that somehow the actor himself was suspended for a realistic enactment of hanging. Other plays of the period staged hangings in full view of the audience, most notably Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, which has two of them, and the trick seems to involve the actor wearing a concealed harness under his clothes to which the real suspension line was attached, while a rope, having just enough tension to stay taut without being uncomfortable, ran from the halter around the actor’s neck to the gibbet (Astington 1983). Carried off professionally, this effect was doubtless spectacular and moving, and all the more so in the present scene because the audience would wonder if More had simply lied about attempting to secure the king’s mercy for the ringleaders, or had tried and failed. In her execution speech that follows the lines quoted, Doll Williamson is explicitly disappointed in More: “Yet would I praise his honesty much more / If he had kept his word and saved our lives” (7.103–104). Pardon comes just in time to save Doll but too late for Lincoln, and to that extent, More has indeed broken his word given to Lincoln and somewhat loses the audience’s sympathy.

The obvious scene to compare with this is the final one, Scene 17, which depicts More’s own

execution but stops short of this scene’s realistic enactment. His love of wordplay stays with More until the end—“I shall forget my head,” “good for the headache,” “cutt’st not off my beard” (17.25, 87, 104–105)—but More also allows himself a little of the recriminatory and self-exculpatory tone of Lincoln. Indeed, Shrewsbury has to remind More of the conventional form of this ritual: “My lord, ’twere good you’d publish to the world / Your great offence unto his majesty” (17.70–71). In response, More will not name his offense but acknowledges favors done to him and offers his king in return “a reverent head . . . [and] because I think my body will then do me small pleasure, let him but bury it and take it” (17.78–82). Depending on the tone chosen by the actor, this may be a mild reproof or an extremely vehement one.

Act III, Scene 2 (Scene 8)

MORE. How long have you worn this hair?

FALCONER. I have worn this hair ever since
I was born.

MORE. You know that’s not my question: but
how long
Hath this shag fleece hung dangling on thy
head?

FALCONER. How long, my lord? Why,
sometimes thus long,
Sometimes lower, as the Fates and humours
please.

. . . .

My lord, Jack Falconer tells no Aesop’s fables.
Troth, I was not at barber’s this three years. I
have not been cut, nor will not be cut, upon
a foolish vow which, as the Destinies shall
direct, I am sworn to keep.

MORE. When comes that vow out?

FALCONER. Why, when the humours are
purged; not these three years.

MORE. Vows are recorded in the court of heaven,
For they are holy acts. Young man, I charge thee
And do advise thee start not from that vow.
And for I will be sure thou shalt not shear,
Besides because it is an odious sight
To see a man thus hairy, thou shalt lie
In Newgate till thy vow and thy three years
Be full expired.—Away with him.

FALCONER. My lord—

MORE. Cut off this fleece and lie there but a month.

FALCONER. I'll not lose a hair to be Lord Chancellor of Europe!

MORE. To Newgate then. Sirrah, great sins are bred
In all that body where there's a foul head.
Away with him.

Exeunt all but Randall

At first sight the interlude of Falconer's hair seems an entirely pointless piece of comic business. It comes at a point when the audience has been led to expect, as More does, the arrival of Erasmus. This gives the episode an urgent pointlessness to complement its visual appeal. It may not be immediately apparent when reading the play that, in performance, a long head of hair offers a talented actor considerable opportunities of amusing business, for example by turning the head quickly so as almost to leave the hair behind; actors playing Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night* not infrequently make such play with their long hair. Falconer's responses to More's questioning have a mirroring quality to them: Hitherto, we have seen only More play on words in this fashion, and it comes as something of a surprise to find another punster getting the better of him. That Falconer is rather like More in his person and his situation is signaled earlier in the scene by his description of his occupation:

"I serve, next under God and my prince, Master Morris" (8.81–83). Putting his masters in rank order like this is just how More thinks about his service, and it is a belief (that first comes God and then the king) that More will die for. Falconer is growing his hair because he took a vow not to visit the barber for a haircut for three years, and More's response is perhaps misleading: "Vows are recorded in the court of heaven, / For they are holy acts" (8.114–115). More presumably believes that such a vow is not a holy act and need not be kept, but he acts as though he takes the vow seriously and would not have Falconer break it.

In offering Falconer the choice between a long prison sentence until his vow be expired, or a short one if he will break it, More treats the ruffian much as the king will later treat More. The pressure More comes under to sign the articles of the Act of Supremacy has no effect because he is adamant to the point of death, whereas Falconer quickly capitulates and soon reappears with his hair cut. (Doubtless in performance the actor merely removes a long wig to effect the change.) At this stage in the drama, it is merely comic that a spell of harsh punishment can make a man forgo an avowed principle, but that will become a central theme in the play's last few scenes as More's friends and family plead with him to sign the king's papers and save himself. On one level, the audience is encouraged to admire More for his defiance of his king on a point of principle, but that admiration is leavened by the recollection that in an analogous situation conducted in a comic key, More behaved just like the king in attempting to force a man to abandon his principles. That it is done in a comic key does not diminish the hypocrisy, for More's own habitual jesting puts everything, including his own execution, into a comic key; there is not so great a difference between him and "ruffians," a term More earlier used for those who defy their monarch (6.94).

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAY

The play is held together by the character of More, whose rise and fall it depicts. Perhaps surprisingly,

the main activity for which More was known, his writing (in particular his book *Utopia*), is entirely omitted from the story in order to focus on various facets of his character by showing a sequence of events that illustrate them. This can tend to make the events portrayed seem rather episodic, rather like an unrelated series of disparate scenes. However, there are subtle connections between all the scenes, and the play has two central artistic aims: to show the rewarding of a popular man known for his integrity (a living embodiment of the marriage of wit and wisdom that forms the play-within-the-play) and to reveal the contradic-

tions that lie underneath that supposed integrity. The core problem that the play dramatizes is the division of authority, which is shown to be the condition of a series of interrelated institutions, each of which refracts the division in its own way. The first is the division between the authority of the City of London and the authority of the court at Westminster, which was a fact of life for Londoners in More's time (the early 16th century) and those alive when the play was written in the 1590s. The second division is between loyalty to the monarch as temporal ruler and loyalty to the pope as spiritual ruler, which division causes More's (and



Page from *The life and death of Sir Thomas Moore, Lord High Chancellor of England*, written by Cresacre More in 1630. This illustration shows members of the More family. (Illustration by Cresacre More)

Rochester's) downfall. These two main divisions are mirrored in a sequence of minor divisions that the play dramatizes.

In the opening scene, two groups of characters are established: the recently arrived foreigners and their victims, the native Londoners. The latter are rendered coherent as a group by their various citizen trades, for the occupations of all of them are named. Doll says that she is a carpenter's wife and introduces her husband, Sherwin says he is the goldsmith that they have heard about (because de Barde took his wife), and Lincoln says that he is a broker and that the Bettses are his "brethren" (also brokers). The honest, working Londoners are implicitly categorized in opposition to the strangers of no stated occupation, although later it will be complained that the foreigners are taking Londoners' work or otherwise harming their trade. The ethnic identity of the foreigners is not entirely clear. In Scene 4, Lincoln lists some of the aliens' names, and they sound Dutch; one of them is identified as a Picard and their Dutch/French origin is confirmed by Ralph Betts. This is somewhat at odds with his brother George Betts calling de Barde a "Lombard" in the opening scene (1.55). The power of the Londoners is their collective identification, one with another, while the power of the foreigners comes from their ambassador, who has the ear of the king. Implicitly, then, this opening scene establishes that the exercise of authority, and in particular the court's remoteness from events "on the ground" in London, creates tensions.

To understand the significance of the tension between the City and the court requires some knowledge of the geopolitics and economics of early-modern London. The river formed a natural southern boundary to the authority of the City, with the land on the south bank coming under the jurisdiction of the magistrates of Surrey and, in parts, the bishop of Winchester, although Southwark (where the open-air playhouses were located) was annexed as a suburb of the City in 1550 (Menzel 2006, 169–172). Although the monarch was the ultimate ruler and authority in early-modern England, London had considerable autonomy.

The significance of the city wall was that, within its bounds, the trades of London were regulated by the various guilds (also called livery companies) administered from the Guildhall. For each occupation, such as goldsmith (Sherwin's trade) or carpenter (Williamson's trade), there was a guild that regulated the business in that field. Members of the guild were said to be "free" of the company, meaning that they had met its conditions of membership, which could happen by patrimony (that is, by inheritance from a parent), or by redemption (paying a membership fee), or—and this was by far the most common route—by apprenticeship.

A freeman of a guild was allowed to engage a child worker as an apprentice for a fixed term of usually seven years, beginning somewhere between the age of 14 and 17 and ending with freedom of the company between the age of 21 and 24. An apprentice was not paid wages but was provided with food and lodging and taught the craft of his master. (In some trades, the apprenticeship would end with the production of a piece of work proving that all the skills of the trade had been acquired, known as a master-piece, whence our modern word for a great work of art.) Most apprentices were teenage boys or young men living away from the parental home and hence notoriously prone to antisocial behavior. In *Sir Thomas More*, Sir John Munday recounts being attacked by a "sort" (that is, a group) of apprentices wielding "cudgels" (5.3), meaning clubs. Apprentices were known to be keen to start or join in any kind of civil disturbance, and in the play, their presence helps turn the Londoners' uprising into a potentially uncontrollable riot. Thus, in preparation for the execution of the ringleaders, the master sheriff gives the order "Let proclamation once again be made / That every householder, on pain of death, / Keep in his prentices" (7.21–23).

The guild for each trade not only regulated the contracts of apprenticeship but also did the following: set the rates of pay for journeymen, those who had finished an apprenticeship but did not go on to be masters in their own right; controlled rates of production, for example by limiting the length

of a book run to 1,500 copies so that typesetters would have enough work to do; settled trade disputes between members; and paid benefits to support the families of members who died. Trades that operated within the guild system were kept reasonably profitable, with members allowed neither to starve nor to become excessively wealthy. However, it was possible to work outside the guild system, especially in the suburbs such as Southwark. It was a recurrent complaint among guild members of late-16th-century London that skilled foreigners from Europe were moving into these areas and competing unfairly with members of the respective London company. There is a glance at such complaints in the rioters' references to the price of food and "the undoing of poor prentices" (6.11), although as the insurrection grows—and especially after the play was revised by the inclusion of the Additions (a process detailed in any good critical edition of the play)—this economic issue becomes hopelessly confused with sheer xenophobic fear of foreign foods.

As well as the guild system that had been developed over centuries, the late 16th century saw the growth of an entirely new way of organizing a business by forming what was called a joint-stock company. In such an arrangement, a group of sharers would pool their wealth to form a company to pursue a particular new venture (say, trading with an overseas colony or running a theater troupe), the money being spent on whatever capital was needed to carry out the endeavor (the purchase and rigging of a ship or the acquisition of costumes and manuscript playbooks). After paying whatever expenses were incurred (the wages of a crew or the rent on a theater), the profits made from the venture would be split equally among the sharers. In this system of business, there was no guild to limit the wealth that could be generated, but equally, there was no protection in the event of failure. Some members of successful joint-stock companies (such as Shakespeare, a sharer in the Chamberlain's Men, later the King's Men) became fabulously wealthy, while others who were less fortunate and/or skillful lost everything.

Whereas the guilds were controlled by the authorities of the City, joint-stock companies needed a license (typically one granting a monopoly) from the Crown or its officials. Because there was no guild for actors—the entire industry only really began when the Crown became involved in regulating playing in the mid-16th century (Egan 2003)—the theater companies were all necessarily joint-stock companies, each operating under a license from the senior aristocrat that gave it its name. One way to contrast the guilds and the joint-stock companies is to think of the former as an expression of how business was conducted at the end of the feudal epoch, and the latter as marking the beginning of the new capitalist organization of production in society. The tension between these two modes of production (as Marxists call them) is apparent across the history and art of late-16th- and early-17th-century England but does not feature directly in the play *Sir Thomas More*. It does, however, figure indirectly.

At the beginning of Scene 5, Shrewsbury, Surrey, Palmer, and Cholmley enter and report that the king has sent them to help the Lord Mayor, for the City is an authority over itself. At the end of Scene 6, the Lord Mayor comments that the king has honored the City by making one of its officials, a sheriff, into a knight and a privy counselor. More assures "My lord and brethren" (that is, fellow servants of the City) that "this rising of my private blood"—meaning that he has earned it not as a sheriff but as a private man—will not make him forget and neglect the City's welfare (6.237, 242). In Scene 7, the execution of the riot's ringleaders, the division between the authority of the Crown and the authority of the City becomes explicit. The sheriff has a death warrant from the privy council and worries that if he does not see it rapidly carried out, "The city will be fined for this neglect" (7.29). The terrible mistake regarding the pardon for the ringleaders arises because there are two centers of power (court and City), or three if we factor in the privy council's capacity for independent action. The City (center I), fearful of the ill-favor of the privy council (center II), executes John Lincoln

while More is pleading for clemency from the king (center III).

More himself comes from the City, not the court, and he rises through its hierarchy to become one of its two sheriffs before the play starts. In reward for quelling the riot, More is made a knight and a privy counselor, catapulting him out of the City hierarchy and into the heart of the court. This makes for much awkwardness of protocol when More meets his former “brethren,” the lord mayor and aldermen of the City, as witnessed in the polite but pained disagreements about who should sit where when More is entertaining them at his house in Scene 9. At this point a contradiction emerges. At the start of the scene, More is told by a messenger that the lord mayor and aldermen are about to pay him an unexpected visit, but when More greets them—with an assurance of fraternal amity, “once I was your brother, / And so am still in heart” (9.94–95)—he speaks as if he invited them, saying he is grateful “That on so short a summons you would come / To visit” (9.110–111). This might only be a sign that the collaborating dramatists failed to make all the details of their collective labor cohere. Alternatively, if it is a deliberate contradiction, it might suggest that More feels the need to gloss over the inconsiderate and monarchlike behavior of turning up without an invitation and expecting extravagant hospitality. Elizabeth I, on the throne when the play was written, was said to do this to her senior courtiers.

There seems to be some connection between the rise of Protestantism and the rise of capitalism. In his early-20th-century book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber argued that the widespread success of Protestantism in the 16th century—of which Henry VIII’s conversion was a central part—made Christians behave in ways that promoted the growth of early capitalism. Many Catholic theologians called upon believers to display *contemptus mundi* (contempt for the world), meaning that since this earthly existence is only a short and transitory state before each soul comes to face God in heaven, it was pointless to concern oneself with one’s position in the world. This idea

underlies the disdain for the world shown by Rochester and More in the play: they simply do not love life enough to fear losing it. According to Weber, the Protestant doctrine of predestination, on the other hand, encouraged Christians to interpret successful pursuance of their trades as signs that they were “saved” (rather than “damned”), and since it also discouraged charity and forbade large donations to the church, Protestantism tended to promote the accumulation of hard-earned wealth that was needed for capitalism to get started.

These ideas form part of the intellectual background to *Sir Thomas More*, and we can trace their influence in the ways that the play stages the tensions between the City and the Crown. On the largest scale, the division of authority between the two is literalized in the staging at the beginning of the final scene, More’s execution. The scene’s opening stage direction is “*Enter the Sheriffs of London and their Officers at one door, the Warders with their halberds at another.*” The Warders are the guards of the Tower of London (and halberds their weapons), and the Tower was one of the palaces owned by the monarch. It is situated at the southeastern corner of the fortified wall that marked the boundary of the City, where it meets the Thames, and as such is a liminal space where the authority of City and Crown interact. The Crown had independent access to the Tower because it could be reached by river, and More is said to be arriving that way at the start of Scene 14. The Tower was so strongly associated with its river access that in More’s wife’s nightmare, the couple are sucked into a whirlpool on the Thames right in front of the Tower (11.18–26). Although More is guilty of an offense against the Crown, in the final scene, it is the City that must execute him, and hence its opening stage direction prepares for his being handed back to the sheriffs after imprisonment by the Crown in the Tower. The stage of an open-air amphitheater playhouse of Shakespeare’s time thrust out into the yard where the audience stood and was backed by a wall pierced with two stage doors, with possibly a larger central opening and/or discovery space between them. By having the

sheriffs enter at one of these doors and the Tower's guards enter at the other to start the final scene, the play emblemizes this polarity of power. The theater stage stands as the space where the authority of the monarch meets that of the City.

Earlier in the play, as his fame and authority rose, More found himself the cause of divided authority. This is one of the points of the peculiar scene with Falconer, the man who has vowed not to cut his hair. Falconer has been arrested for fighting in the streets (perhaps depicted in a scene now lost from the manuscript) and insists on his case being heard by More: "I'll appear before no king christened but my good Lord Chancellor," and "I thought it stood not with my reputation and degree to come to my questions and answers before a city justice" (8.50–51, 88–90). Paradoxically, it seems that More's pure goodness can be corrosive of authority, undermining the power of the city's justices. Divided authority likewise underlies the seemingly pointless debate in the privy council about the loyalty of the emperor of Germany. More overcomes Surrey's fear that after a joint German-English military victory over the "perfidious French" (10.23) the German emperor would turn on the English and demand more than his share of the spoils. Imagining a world in which men fight for the honor of it rather than the rewards, More pictures one with "no court, no city" (10.64), a fantasy of unmediated temporal power. The play suggests that such fantasies are dangerous, because the simple moral principles that More imagines are powerful enough alone to govern behavior turn out to be self-contradictory.

The Christian golden rule is a clear example of the self-contradictory nature of simplistic ethical maxims. More tries to use it in Scene 2 to teach Justice Suresby the lesson of not condemning Smart, a victim of pickpocket Lifter, for a fault (the carrying of too much money) that he, Suresby, is also guilty of. Yet Suresby appears to be promoting what is now known as moral relativism, meaning that Lifter's crime cannot be judged absolutely but rather must be considered in the context of the motivation for it, including the temptation placed

in his way by Smart. In undermining Suresby, More stands for an absolutism of judgment and against the hypocrisy of judges, and yet More aims to promote leniency toward offenders like Lifter. Moreover, More's trick on Suresby invokes its own kind of moral relativism, since the picking of Suresby's purse cannot be judged in isolation, cannot be condemned by an absolute rule, since it was done at More's behest and in return for a pardon. Relativism sneaks back into the very procedure meant to undermine it. When Suresby is sent by More to hold a private talk with Lifter, he wants the pickpocket to confess to crimes that he has committed but not been charged with, and Suresby sounds rather like a Catholic priest: "Wilt thou discharge thy conscience . . . Confess but what thou knowst" (2.97, 110). Revealing further crimes cannot get Lifter into greater trouble since any one of his purse-lifting offenses is enough to hang him, so what is the point of recounting the rest? As Suresby's diction indicates, the good of such confession is a free conscience. Lifter complains to Suresby that he has been charged with more crimes than he has committed, and again from a practical point of view, this seems irrelevant since any one of them will do for a death sentence.

The point of the interview seems to be that establishing the number of the crimes nonetheless somehow matters, and this suggests the Catholic approach to sin and good deeds, which is that an account can be drawn up (each good deed canceling out a sin) to determine the overall state of the soul. It was precisely this kind of accountancy approach to sin, something like a modern profit-and-loss table, that was objected to by the Protestant reformers of the early 16th century such as Martin Luther and John Calvin. Suresby wants Lifter not only to further incriminate himself, for the purpose of clearing his soul, but also to incriminate others and to explain how the crime of pickpocketing is carried out. He exalts in the technical details and reveals a passionate zeal for information: "Ay, those are they I look for . . . 'Tis this I long to know . . . Excellent, excellent!" (2.118–134). Suresby sounds curiously like an interrogator

extracting information about religious heterodoxy, which is precisely the work that the historical More undertook for Henry VIII in hunting Protestants and that the dramatist Munday, as Topcliffe's assistant, undertook for Elizabeth I in hunting Catholics. Munday's own writings on religion suggest a deeply ambivalent response to Catholicism—a mixture of attraction and repulsion—and perhaps this scene expresses a moral uncertainty underlying his virulently anti-Catholic tracts. The scene certainly displaces any hope of the kind of moral certainty that More was renowned for possessing; rather right and wrong become inextricably entwined in what should be the simple exercise of justice.

This problematizing of right and wrong can help to explain one of the central mysteries of the drama, which is why someone as apparently anti-Catholic as Munday would write a valorizing biography of the Catholic martyr More. Perhaps Munday felt about the man as he felt about the man's religion, being torn between liking and loathing. The principles that More stands for seem on the face of things to be admirable, but when looked into they contain horrors, and this is also how many readers respond to the historical More's most famous work, *Utopia*. In Stephen Greenblatt's influential reading, More's own personality and the ideas in his book are characterized as failed attempts to reconcile extremely opposed principles and opinions: "More brings together then a near-chaos of conflicting psychological, social, and religious pressures and fashions them into a vision that seems at once utterly clear and utterly elusive" (Greenblatt 1980, 57). The same could well be said of the play *Sir Thomas More*. One of the ways this is achieved is by unsettling the stable perspective that playgoers habitually take up when they begin to evaluate what characters say, and that can be done by forcing playgoers to see something from two points of view in rapid succession.

In the midst of the first scene's setting out the play's basic contrast between good native Londoners and bad immigrant foreigners, Doll Williamson utters what seems at first a simple lament: "I am ashamed that free-born Englishmen, having beaten

strangers within their own bounds, should thus be braved and abused by them at home" (1.78–80). On reflection—which is something more readily available to a reader than a playgoer—this seems an ironic sentiment, since within the foreigners "own bounds" (that is, in their country) it was the English who were strangers and the foreigners who were "at home." Doll tries to contrast the triumphs of Englishmen fighting foreigners abroad with the humiliations they are now suffering in London, but because the terms are relative—"strangers," "own bounds," and "home" all depend on where you are—she seems to end up suggesting that the English have in the past been no better than those who now oppress them. This sounds like a pre-echo of More's golden rule speech to the rioters, but twisted into a vicious cycle rather than a virtuous one. If the English have already beaten the foreigners in their country then, according to the rule of reciprocity, what is happening in London is merely the Londoners' just deserts. This kind of reading makes the play particularly topical in times of terrorist attack against Western cities, as discussed below.

Linguistic details again express the slipperiness of ethical principles when Doll starts to use the word *captain*. First she says that she will be "a captain among" the rioters (1.144), which promise she seems to fulfill by entering in armor at the start of Scene 4. When Ralph Betts's song of rebellion threatens to drown out Lincoln's advice to the rebels, Doll calls for them to "Hear Captain Lincoln speak" (4.15). Betts picks up the word and calls Lincoln "Captain Courageous" (4.35). More, too, uses the expression when reporting the extent of the uprising ("The captains of this insurrection . . . came but now / To both the Counters," 5.9–11), but in his speech to the rioters, he explicitly denies the possibility that such an office can exist: "What rebel captain, / As mutinies are incident, by his name / Can still the rout? Who will obey a traitor?" (6.129–131). That is, since a core principle of an uprising is the refusal to recognize authority, how can anyone exercise authority over a rebellion? The notion of a rebel captain is, More insists,



A 1523 portrait of Erasmus (Painting by Hans Holbein the Younger)

a contradiction in terms. This is another version of the rhetorical maneuver by which he disarms the rioters, showing that their behavior is logically inconsistent just as the golden rule shows that it is ethically inconsistent. Yet by concentrating on this leading group of rioters, this “limb of riot” that More prevented from becoming “joined with other branches of the city” (6.197–198), the suppression of the riot depends upon the very notion of leadership-in-anarchy that it would deny.

A hypothetical switching of places with someone else lies behind the play’s recurrent explorations of the ethics of reciprocity, but More’s practical experiment in switching places with his servant Randall in Scene 8 shows its limitations. Erasmus is highly impressed with More-as-Randall who welcomed them into the house, reasoning that if even More’s servants are educated enough to speak Latin, then

More himself must be all the more impressively learned: “What’s the master, then, / When such good parts shine in his meanest men?” (8.152–153). But Randall-as-More cannot keep up his end of the exchange, lapsing into trivial questions such as “how long will the Holland cheese in your country keep without maggots?” (8.174–175). This would suggest that there are inherent differences between people—just as Erasmus is good despite being Dutch—and hence that wisdom and goodness are not merely a matter of public performances but of inner qualities. And yet, the play keeps at the forefront of the playgoers’ attention the fact that it is a play, that More’s wisdom and goodness are only a performance by its actors. The performativity of virtue is stressed by the recurrent metatheatrical comments: Lifter’s name is “As his profession is” (2.10) because he (like the characters in the inset play) is a type rather than an individuated person, he shushes the audience with “Silence there, ho! Now doth the Justice enter” (2.95), and More takes a role in *The Marriage of Wit and Wisdom* that is no different from the role he plays in life. “Il n’y a pas de hors-drame”: there is no outside to the play, to adapt a phrase popular with one school of modern critics (Derrida 1976, 158).

When the actors of *The Marriage of Wit and Wisdom* are revealed to be “My Lord Cardinal’s players” (9.50), an early-modern audience would likely understand them to be in service to Cardinal Thomas Wolsey. He was More’s predecessor as lord chamberlain and fell from grace by exactly the same cause that brings down More: Henry VIII’s desire to overcome the considerable religious obstacles to his marrying Anne Boleyn. Yet logically these cannot be Cardinal Wolsey’s men, since in historic fact, Wolsey’s fall was the occasion of More’s rise. By making the audience imagine More being entertained by Wolsey’s servants, the play collapses the historical narrative in order to juxtapose their fates. The same temporal collapse is enacted in Roper’s wife’s nightmare presentiment of More’s downfall: “I saw him here in Chelsea church, / Standing upon the rood-loft, now defaced” (11.37–38). The defacing of the ornate decoration in churches was

part of the wave of iconoclasm within the English Reformation that followed Henry VIII's break from Rome, so Roper's wife's dream puts the More of the 1530s into a post-Reformation church of the 1590s. By closing the historical gap between the times depicted in the play and the occasion of its performance, the play makes More seem to adhere to an abandoned faith. This is not unintentional anachronism but rather part of the play's effort to make More, rather than Henry, seem to be someone out of step with his times.

CRITICISM, CONTROVERSIES, AND THE PLAY TODAY

Because the play was not widely recognized as Shakespeare's until the early 20th century, it was not included in Complete Works editions until Harold Jenkins provided a text for Charles Jasper Sisson's collection (Shakespeare 1954). Even the Oxford Complete Works of 1986, which brought a radical new treatment of the canon, included only the small section of the play believed to be written by Shakespeare, making it impossible to see the overall artistic design. (The second edition of 2005 remedied this defect by printing the whole play.) The neglect of the play by editors necessarily rendered it largely unread by critics of Shakespeare, and little has been written about it as a complete play. The focus of attention was first upon the manuscript in which the play is embodied and the theater practices from which it emerges (McMillin 1987; Howard-Hill 1989), and the connected claims that Shakespeare wrote part of the play and that part of the manuscript is in his handwriting. It is, of course, quite possible for someone to be the author of writing not in his hand—this would happen every time someone used a theater scribe to copy out his material for actors or printers to use—and for someone not to be the author of writing that is in his hand, as when he acted as a scribe for others. The claim that Hand D is Shakespeare's has not won universal assent, although most scholars find the paleographical arguments overwhelming (Pollard et al. 1923; Howard-Hill 1989). The case for Shakespeare being the author of the material

attributed to him was recently settled beyond dispute: The play contains unusual words and phrasings that are recurrent in Shakespeare's writing and no one else's (Jackson 2006).

Concerning the play's themes, Joan Fitzpatrick recently traced how the different kinds of food mentioned in it are readable as indices of early-modern attitudes towards alterity as well as class (Fitzpatrick 2004) and how the character of More himself is subtly undermined by the play's recurrent images of gluttony (Fitzpatrick 2008). More likes to play on his name, and Fitzpatrick suggests that the audience is encouraged to continue the process in respect to food (eating more) and the mouth (the maw). This suggests a further extension of the theme of hypocrisy that runs through the scenes of Justice Suresby's exposure, the quelling of the riot, and the cutting of Falconer's hair. One group of critics has been keen to connect the complex facts of the play's collaborative creation to its themes. Others have found parallels between the peculiar textual situation—the play's existence in a unique and messy manuscript—and the themes it handles. Jeffrey Masten sees a connection between the collaborative nature of the play's composition and the ways that it treats human individuation (Masten 2001). The play begins with a scene about distinguishing English property (women and food) and foreigners' property, and in quelling the riot More executes the opposite maneuver, making the Londoners see themselves as like the foreigners. For Masten, this implicates More in a kind of shape-shifting best exemplified in his extemporaneous performance in the play-within-the-play, *The Marriage of Wit and Wisdom*. Where in all this play is the real More? Stripped of his titles, he becomes "only 'More'" (11.70), a living oxymoron expressing both lack and excess. His verbal dexterity at turning words inside out is rebounded upon himself, and as Fitzpatrick points out, this is expressed in terms of his own body, "The fat is gone" (11.70), and much depends on the physique of the actor cast to play More.

Masten notices that running through the play's dramatic material in different hands is a recurrent

concern for the rhetoric of selfhood, sameness, and strangeness. It seems that the censor Tilney disliked vagueness on this point, and where the dramatists had identified a wrongdoer as a “stranger,” Tilney changed it to “Lombard” (3.49). Throughout this chapter, I have called them foreigners to avoid adjudicating between the dramatists and their censor, but Masten rightly points out that even the word *foreigner* could be ambiguous, meaning simply a person not from one’s parish or recently arrived in town from the countryside. More wrote *Utopia*, a book about meeting a stranger (Hythloday) and hearing about the strange places he had been, and the play’s writers seem to understand how slippery such definitions are. Nina Levine is also concerned with the collaborative nature of the play’s composition, and she sees a parallel with the collaborative endeavor of rioting for which the Londoners come together (Levine 2007). The dramatists conjure up a mob for More to quell, but it is one that the audience has first seen as individuals (feisty Doll, leaderly Lincoln, bawdy Ralph Betts), so there is individuation within the collective. Censor Tilney, Levine reckons, probably changed the dialogue references to Frenchmen and strangers because there were lots of French Huguenots in London in the 1590s, and they might be offended, but there were not many Lombards. That is, the word *Lombard* was a convenient foreign label to use precisely because they were not around to object.

In Tilney’s crossing out of speech prefixes, Levine sees a fussing over individuation: Did he perhaps object to the mob being identifiable characters, with individual motivations and personal grievances, that the audience had first seen suffering abuses earlier in the play? As she notes, Hand D (Shakespeare) gave the line “We’ll be ruled by you, Master More, if you’ll stand our friend to procure our pardon” (6.158–159) to “All” the rioters, but another writer, Hand C, reassigned it to Lincoln specifically, thereby generating a marked irony since Lincoln is the only rebel not pardoned. Hand C did a lot of such individuating of characters, giving speeches designated for “All” and “Others” to particular named speakers, and there is further

irony in the fact that we do not know whose hand it was, so his individuation as a person is lost to us. It might even be the same person as Hand D, that is Shakespeare, acting in a different mode of composition.

In Tracey Hill’s reading of the play, the individuated personalities of the rebels are important because of the extraordinary audience sympathy evoked for them, which is why they attracted so much attention from the censor, and because they are clearly Londoners defending London (Hill 2005). Most plays of the period that show such uprisings present them as a threat to the City, with Jack Cade’s rebellion in *The Contention of York and Lancaster/Henry VI, Part 2* a typical example. But *Sir Thomas More* daringly reverses this trend, and by recurrent references to precise locations in London, such as St. Martin’s and Cheapside, it collapses the historical differences between 1517 when the Ill May Day uprising took place and the 1590s. In other words, playgoers were encouraged to see this as their contemporary London being defended. According to Hill, the most significant consequence of the revision of the manuscript by the dramatists who assisted Munday was the toning down of this sympathy for the uprising. By giving Ralph Betts more to say, and making the crowd more disorderly and xenophobic, Lincoln’s and Doll’s rational arguments for the uprising are undermined.

For many plays by Shakespeare, there is little or no evidence of performance in his own time, but we assume that performances occurred. With *Sir Thomas More*, it is distinctly possible that the problems arising from the sensitivity of the topics it handles made the players abandon the project, leaving it unperformed until recent times. The major recent productions were by the Stage One Theatre Company (directed by Michael Walling at the Shaw Theatre, London) in 1990 and by the Royal Shakespeare Company (directed by Robert Delamere at the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon) in 2005, both coinciding with the publication of editions of the play (Munday 1990; Shakespeare 2005). *Sir Thomas More* reads today as extraordinarily prescient of three interrelated

21st-century concerns: the potentially fatal conflicts between religious doctrines, the economic consequences of migration, and the ways that xenophobic responses are engaged by these matters of religion and migration. However, the terms in which these concerns were formulated in the 16th century were very different from those of today, because of course the religions and the patterns of economic migration were entirely different. Nonetheless, suicide bombings by fundamentalist Islamists in London in July 2005 made the choices about race and religion in the Royal Shakespeare Company's production resonate particularly strongly. The misbehaving foreigners were played by black actors among a predominantly white cast, which strengthened the overtones of racism in the rioting of abused Londoners, which in Hill's terms means taking still further the adulteration by other dramatists of Munday's initial conception of a just rebellion.

In what is usually taken to be a slip of the pen in the manuscript, More expresses his revulsion at the rioters' "momtanish inhumanity," which Jowett emends and modernizes to "mountainish [that is, mountainous] inhumanity" (6.155). Karl Wentersdorf argues, however, that *momtanish* is not a slip of the pen but a contraction of *mahometanish* and refers specifically to

Islamic barbarity (Wentersdorf 2006). As well as providing further topical interest, this reading strengthens the religious dimension of the play by making More accuse the rioters not only of rebellion against God (by rising against his anointed deputy, the monarch) but also of apostasy. This would further ironize More's downfall, caused by his adamant refusal to follow the change in the English state's religion, and give further shading to the play's theme of hypocrisy. In Wentersdorf's reading, More accuses the rioters of a barbarity so excessive that it can only be likened to the consequences of misguided religious fervor. Such fervor is readily apparent in the historical More himself, whose behavior as a persecutor and executioner of Christian heretics was so starkly contrasted with the ideals expressed in his *Utopia*. If the play is subtly drawing attention to this, the More who emerges is somewhat less attractive a figure than critics have generally assumed.

FIVE TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. **More's tragic downfall:** To what extent are we encouraged to sympathize with More's adamant refusal to accommodate his king's wishes? Does More come across as an admirable man of principles or an obstinate fool? When considering this, do not forget the effect of More's refusal upon his wider family and household. How seriously do you take More's own assurances that his family can survive without him?
2. **Court versus city:** Do the authority figures of the court seem different from those of the City, and if they do, are we expected to feel differently about them as a consequence? As he rises, More makes the transition from one center of power to the other, but take a close look at what he says about the corrupting nature of power. Is there any evidence that he becomes corrupted, or that he changes (for good or ill) the behavior of others around him?
3. **Casting—what should these people look like?:** The casting of a stage play strongly conditions the meanings it generates, so the appearance of characters is no trivial matter. If the actor



"Thomas More Reflects," from William Hickman Smith's *The National and Domestic History of England*, published in 1878

playing More is thin, it can suggest a virtuous, even monklike, abstinence from the pleasures of food, while a plump and jovial More might be thought to be more in keeping with the fun-loving figure who is forever jesting. Should the foreigners look racially or ethnically different from the Londoners? Consider what difference it would make to the scenes of rioting, and the motivations underlying it, if the foreigners look like or unlike the Londoners.

4. **Oratory and rhetoric:** Why do some people's arguments fail to convince their hearers in the play and other people's succeed? Using a guide to rhetorical terms, see if those who manage to be persuasive are using language in fundamentally different ways from those who fail to persuade. Does the use of prose or verse have any bearing on this?
5. **Jests and puns:** Look for all the occasions when characters use puns in the play. Are the effects always supposed to be comic, or is there a place for tragic wordplay? What do you make of More's repeated feints at capitulation? Is he doing this deliberately to amuse those around him, or are the dramatists playing with the readers' and playgoers' expectations?

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